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SUBJECT: POST-ELECTION, AKP CIRCLES ITS WAGONS

REF: ANKARA 485

Classified By: POL Counselor Daniel O'Grady, for reasons 1.4 (b,d)

11. (C) SUMMARY: Following a set-back in the March 29 local elections, Turkey's governing Justice and Development Party (AKP) has entered soul-searching mode. With eyes already on 2011 parliamentary elections, and amid a worsening economic atmosphere, AKP will try to find ways to recoup losses both in the center and on the right of the political spectrum. The result is most likely to be a pensive AKP that will judge every move in the context of public opinion at the time, suggesting that Turkey's post-election reform agenda will be economy-focused, slow, and deliberate. END SUMMARY.

12. (C) Although AKP is portraying the nation-wide local election results of 29 March as a victory, it has also expressed disappointment that its 38 percent of the votes for provincial assembly seats fell short of PM Erdogan's last-minute declared goal of 42 percent, let alone its 2007 general election result of 47 percent -- which many over-confident AKP officials had predicted they would exceed. Erdogan stated in an election-night speech that AKP understood that the election results were a message from the voters and would evaluate them closely.

AKP'S MISSTEPS

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13. (C) AKP has publicly tried to cast blame for its setback largely on external forces. AKP's central executive board pointed to the economic crisis as the main reason for AKP's decline, according to the ANKA News Agency. It also claimed its broad-based message was blocked by opposition parties running on single issues -- secularism, racism, Kurdish identity, religion. This argument dodges the obvious point that AKP's broad-based message was either unconvincing or not broad enough to retain voters who had accepted its message in 2007 and 2004 elections. It also oversimplifies the issues of the electoral campaign, ignoring local issues and mischaracterizing some of the opposition parties' platforms, particularly the nationalist Nationalist Action Party (MHP) and religious Saadet Party (SP).

14. (C) Taner Yildiz, an AKP deputy, told the Ambassador in an April 1 meeting that AKP's vote loss, while sharp, reflects a normal pattern in democracies in which a party reaches its "saturation" level. He said the AKP executive board noted

that the party made a number of mistakes in naming candidates, often abandoning popular incumbents or choosing challengers with poor potential. The board also noted, probably rightly, that one of the contributing factors in making these poor choices was disputes between MPs and provincial party organizations over who should be nominated. Another conclusion of the board, according to Yildiz, was that AKP was unable to explain properly to the voters the services, projects, and policies it had enacted, meaning that much of the public saw them as unsuccessful or insincere. Yildiz added that the jobless rarely examine the purported reasons for unemployment, but only care about their own lack of work. (COMMENT: This explanation that the masses do not or cannot understand politics exemplifies the kind of condescension that likely turned many voters off of AKP. END COMMENT)

15. (C) "Maybe we have been too self-confident," suggested Yildiz, flirting with one of the underlying problems with AKP's campaign. AKP entered the electoral race with a sense of complacency and an arrogant manner that did not play well with the Turkish public. This was most visible on a national level with Erdogan and members of the cabinet insisting that the global economic crisis would not hit Turkey, and pursuing a policy of passing off poor economic indicators as anomalies (such as claiming that the rise in unemployment figures was not due to layoffs but to more women looking for formal employment) rather than communicating ways the government would deal with them. This cavalier attitude regarding the economy hurt AKP hardest in the coastal and industrial areas

ANKARA 00000509 002 OF 003

where a drop in exports, and thus in incomes and employment, was especially sharp. The party also insisted on setting as a goal the capture of the greater municipalities AKP had not captured in 2004 -- Trabzon, Izmir, Diyarbakir, and Eskisehir -- rather than focusing on keeping the ones they had won in 2004 from opposition parties, such as Tekirdag and Antalya.

HUBRIS, THEN NAVEL GAZING  
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16. (C) AKP also succumbed to hubris, assuming that the heretofore successful AKP brand would carry its poor candidate choices to victory. This attitude was most obvious in Sanliurfa, where AKP refused to renominate a popular incumbent, and then declared publicly that the voters would even vote for a jacket draped over a chair if it ran on an AKP ticket. The incumbent chose to run as an independent and won, proudly using the empty jacket as an informal symbol of his campaign.

17. (C) Yildiz told us that the AKP would now enter a process of self-review. AKP has always paid very close attention to public opinion polls to guide its policies. The executive board signaled that AKP would renew its polling, declaring that the party would evaluate the election results "sociologically and scientifically" and then consider changes in policy, party administration, and the cabinet. Such a process could be long and painstaking, as AKP reassesses the political environment, finds its bearings, and formulates policies to get AKP back into favor with the voters. Yildiz characterized the process with a Turkish saying, "We now have to take a great risk at the lowest cost."

COMMENT  
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18. (C) Taking great risks at low cost is a very difficult prospect, particularly for a party that has lost votes both in the center of the political spectrum and on the nationalist and religious fringes. It is this difficulty that makes us skeptical of PM Erdogan's announcement that the AKP would soon renew its agenda of EU-oriented political and legal reforms. After nearly two years of leaving the reform process fallow and a surprise election result to call into

question anything they may have prepared before elections, AKP will most likely approach reform carefully and slowly, picking the easiest and most palatable reforms to tackle first. Selling such reforms as EU-focused may no longer be a selling point; over the past year, public opinion toward the EU and the West has become increasingly unfavorable. The opposition may find it politically expedient to play upon Turks' frustrations, fears, and prejudices by labeling any wide-scale reform package as making concessions to the EU. Reforms addressing the Kurdish issue are also politically risky for the AKP: though AKP would potentially increase votes among Kurds in the Southeast, it could alienate center-right and nationalist voters throughout the rest of Turkey. Foreign policy will not be a priority, but issues that were not electorally divisive will probably continue, such as efforts to normalize relations with Armenia. Especially sensitive issues, such as human rights and the Cyprus problem may trigger Davos-style grandstanding for temporary popularity boosts.

¶9. (C) Economic reforms are likely, however. The AKP knows that if the economy does not improve this year and into 2010, it would enter the 2011 electoral campaign at a serious disadvantage. Knowing this, but as always being careful of public opinion, AKP will be likely to focus more heavily on economic stimulus and on reforms that promise short-term political benefit. One example may be a new IMF agreement. Despite the Fund's unpopularity in Turkey and Erdogan's personal antipathy toward it, the GOT can now take advantage of the IMF's recently announced lighter conditionality, which the Prime Minister can spin as the Fund agreeing to a deal on his terms. Likewise, AKP will want to focus Turkey's relationship with the EU on economic concerns, to avoid political issues that will be divisive at home.

ANKARA 00000509 003 OF 003

¶10. (C) Nevertheless, focusing on the economy is by no means a low-risk strategy, because it ties AKP's fortunes to events outside its control. Regardless of what the GOT does, the Turkish economy is unlikely to recover until Turkish exports recover, the great majority of which go to the flagging EU. If the slump is prolonged, and especially if the EU recovers more slowly than the rest of the world, AKP may be forced to move toward more populist economic policies.

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Jeffrey